

You Call Me First by XFiles93Aficionado

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Summary:

Set between the moment when Eleven closes the gate and the Snow Ball night, and addresses ideas as for what Season 3 might come around.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

As always, thank you to my beta, ChaneenW.

Drained of energy, Eleven fell heavily onto the elevator's metallic flooring, and Chief Jim Hopper hastily stooped down to catch her and gather her in his arms. Sitting down, he pulled her into a tight embrace as her own arms clung around his neck, her fists fiercely clutching his coat. He held his breath an instant to freeze the moment in his memory, and, drawing her feeble frame closer, all trembling against him, he realized how vulnerable she could sometimes be. How she was right this moment. In spite of her power, in spite of her strength and incredible courage, she looked fragile as though she could break. Hopper knew he didn't look any better. Jeez, he, too, wanted to cry with relief and gratefulness; he was emotionally exhausted, worn out yet extremely cheerful and optimistic. But he exerted himself as best he could to be her unwavering, withstanding building in the wake of an earthquake. As this unique child softly sobbed into his neck, the lump in his throat was the size of a grapefruit.

"You did good, kid," Hopper said under his breath, his voice an earnest, quivering sigh. He sniffed and reiterated, "You did so good."

His eyes fluttered shut and he pressed his lips to her cheeks for a few seconds. He was desperately trying to regain composure and be strong for her. He inhaled deeply, gritted his teeth, and held her tighter against his chest the way he'd held Sara half a decade ago, her small face resting numbly on his shoulder, the slight pant of her breath rhythmically striking his neck as he fondly watched her out of the corner of his eyes.

His ears were still whistling; the screeching, roaring, and groaning of the beast echoing in his head, and his racing heart still drumming wildly against his ribcage. Jeez, this black hole, this *literal* black hole had been so close to consuming her, too. He would have been as good as dead. But they were alive. They'd made it. No, actually, *she'd* made it. His part in the operation had significantly nothing to do

with its success. He scrunched his lids tighter, his eyes retreating underneath his prominent brow ridges, and he cupped the nape of her neck, thumbing her soft wisps of hair self-consciously, maybe nervously, as he leaned his scratchy face against her baby skin.

“You did it,” he whispered again as if to convince them both, a rush of overwhelming love washing over him.

When the tiny platform had lifted them back up to the surface of their more peaceful world, he carried her out of the nightmare-esque lab compound, and she curled into him and nuzzled her face into his neck.

Whatever it took, he thought to himself. Whatever. It. Took. He repeated the words inwardly as if to brand his mind with hot iron in order to dutifully imprint his determination. He needed no convincing on that matter, though. This kid would have a life. As beautiful, simple, and normal as possible. If any kid deserved it, it was Eleven. Thirteen years stolen were enough. Way more than enough.

He cautiously lowered her and settled her onto the passenger seat, covered her with the spare blanket, and she half-opened her eyes as he was about to close the door.

“Over?” Eleven whispered tiredly.

Hopper took a second to look at her, telling her wordlessly that he cared and that she was important, and then he smiled warmly. “Yes,” he replied at last, gently wiping the blood from below her nose with the corner of the blanket and readjusting it under her chin. “Yes, it’s over. You can rest now.”

“Stay with me?”

His heart dropped in his stomach. “Of course I’m staying with you.” He mentally reprimanded himself.

“Promise?”

He leaned closer, grabbing the hood of the car with one hand and squeezing her shoulder gently with the other, and then locked unblinking and resolute eyes on hers. The fact alone that she'd raised the question hurt him. "I promise," he emphasized softly, hoping he showed the air of a man whose dedication was fixed. She had been betrayed, let down all her life, and he had found nothing better to do than lie to her and fail her on multiple occasions. Dammit, how could he have been so thoughtless and stupid? "I'm staying with you. As long as you need me. As long as you can stand me." The thought had occurred to him that he could have lost her tonight, and as he read her disconcerted eyes, he realized he needed her as much as she needed him. Possibly more. "The longer the better." He smiled. "I'm so sorry again, kid." She bobbed her head up and down, and he gently stroked his hand across her face. "Get some rest now, okay? I *will* be here when you wake up. I promise."

Her eyes slowly closing, she nodded again and he stepped back, his gaze on her as he pushed her door shut. Sitting behind the wheel, he leaned his head back against the headrest, his eyes lost in the distance of an old memory, one hand ready on the ignition.

"Daddy! Daddy!" Sara shrieked in the deserted baseball field. "Faster! Go faster!"

Her eyes pressed shut, the little girl held tight to her father's neck as Hopper made them both spin around himself. He was sure she could feel a horde of butterflies winging its way quickly through her belly, and he wondered how she managed to breathe between her bursts of laughter. Her golden hair flew in a horizontal line behind her head as if she had superpowers. She was having fun, he knew it. Nonetheless, his own head was getting dizzy, therefore he slowed down and lay down on his back.

He smiled up at Sara. Frowning, she propped herself up with a question on her face. "Helicopter tired?" she wondered out loud.

"Yes," Hopper replied, gasping. "Helicopter needs to catch his breath."

Sara leaned upright and hopped on his stomach with a pout as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“Ouch!” Hopper chuckled. He gave in: “Okay, okay, give me just a couple of minutes, and I’m sure we can make it fly again.”

“Promise?”

He laughed. “Yes,” he asserted, pulling her down to his chest again. “Yes, pumpkin, I promise.”

Hopper shook the grief-induced memory out of his mind, took one last glance at Eleven, and then he turned the ignition. Oh yes, he needed her. He needed Eleven badly. The loss of his daughter was still there, that would most likely never go away, and Eleven grew up without parents; they meant more to each other than they could ever have imagined. Two broken pieces that fit.

Jonathan’s car was still there when Hopper arrived at his grandfather’s shack about thirty minutes later. He hadn’t even put the car in park when Joyce dashed out from behind the trees with a flashlight in her hand. Was something wrong? He noticed the mask over her face, but he wasn’t sure whether it was relief, or anxiety, or both. She stopped short before the hood of the car. In the headlights, she covered her mouth with both hands. He switched off the lights and killed the engine.

Joyce rushed toward him and wound her arms around his neck as soon as he was out of the car. “Oh, thank god you’re all right,” she let out. “Is Eleven okay?”

Hopper hugged her back. “Yeah. She’s fine; she’s sleeping.” He wanted to pull back, see her face, and he asked the question several times in his head before he dared say it out loud: “Is Will ... all right?”

“Yeah, yeah, he’s good.” She brushed the hair at the back of his head. “He’s good,” she repeated. “We ... the ... whatever it was that

was trapped within him ... it got out.”

Hopper breathed. “Good.” He pulled back just enough to look at her and they searched each other’s eyes for a moment in the dim light of the night before Hopper jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “I’ll just, um, I’ll get her out of the car,” he spluttered as he disengaged and started round the car.

“Your cabin has no windows anymore,” Joyce called.

He turned around and glanced toward the trees where the little wooden house stood out of sight. “Oh. Right.” He turned to Joyce again and his eyes twinkled. “Yeah, well, we’ve had windows incidents before. We’re used to using extra blankets in such cases.”

“And you have shattered glass all over. I mean, on the floor, the beds, the couch, everywhere,” she reported.

Hopper looked at her blankly. That too had happened before. It was no big deal.

“You two should come home with us.”

“Thanks but I don’t want to be in the wa—”

“None of that, Hop. You’ll take Will’s room,” she decided. “I was planning on keeping him with me tonight anyway. Maybe even for the next five years.”

He chuckled. “Okay ...” He paused. “Are you guys ready to go, then?”

“Come on, Hopper!” Joyce’s seventeen-year-old self shouted cheerfully in his head. “I may have short legs, but I’ll still race you to my place! Catch me if you can!” She’d started running already and he’d chased playfully after her.

Joyce snapped her fingers in front of his face, and he instantly

came back to the dark woods. “Where *were* you?” she asked. He shook his head and stared at her absently, gathering his thoughts. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“A friendly ghost,” he admitted with the ghost of a smile.

“Okay. I was saying that the kids are in the car. D’you want me to drive you?”

“What? No, no!” He looked around, wondering how long he’d been out. “I’m good.”

“Your car’s right there,” she pointed out humoredly as if he couldn’t find it by himself, as if he was on autopilot — and maybe he was. “You know what? I *am* driving you.”

Hopper considered protesting but he had neither the strength nor the heart to argue, so he climbed into the back behind the driver’s side, and sat on the edge of the seat. As Joyce dragged her seat almost all the way forward, Hopper leaned against it and closed his eyes.

2. Chapter 2

An hour after they and the group of tweens had returned to the Byers' house, Jonathan drove everyone to their respective houses and returned home. It was just the Byers, Hopper, and Eleven now. Hopper had put her to bed straight away when they'd arrived, and she had not even awakened when he'd carried her out of the car. She hadn't even budged when Joyce had shrieked a small cry of terror when she'd found out that her fridge had become the cold chamber of a dead "Demo-dog", as Dustin called it. Hopper would have to deal with that in the morning and properly lock it in at the morgue until someone could examine it.

Hopper found himself in the kitchen, alone. The house was quiet and he probably should get to bed, too. He knew he was tired, but he still had this odd, lingering impression of not knowing exactly what was real and what wasn't, this old, familiar feeling he had only encountered after Sara's demise. Before going to bed, Hopper lit a cigarette and went outside.

"What a night it's been, huh?" came Joyce's voice from the far corner of the porch where he could only see the orange tip of her burning cigarette.

He strained to see, and she walked toward him, materializing out of the darkness. "Thought you were sleeping," he said, and he sat on the step and took a drag on his cigarette.

"I'm too tense to sleep. I just sit there and stare at him, you know, as if, if I took my eyes off of him for even a split second he'd go away again," she replied.

"Yeah, I know the feeling."

Joyce sat by his side and they remained silent a moment, smoking, staring absently into the darkness of the driveway and the forest ahead of them.

"I'm proud of you, Hop," Joyce whispered eventually, nudging her shoulder against his.

He cocked his face to her. "Why?"

"I think it's incredible that you took care of Eleven all this time." She paused and studied him. "And you never said anything, never asked for help, not mine anyway, and all the while *I* kept calling for yours and you were all 'If anything happens with Will, *anything at all*, you call me first.'"

"And I'm glad you did."

"It must not have been easy."

Hopper had never been particularly good with receiving compliments. "We did okay."

"She looks great." Joyce marked another pause as if she wanted to give him the time to ponder her words. She raised her brows quickly, shaking her head. "A lot better than she did last year."

"Yeah," he admitted, breaking eye contact.

His mind went back to the day he'd found her in the snowy woods. He remembered how he and Eleven had settled down in their own routine ever since, their own little comfortable universe in which it was only the two of them. He remembered how much he had enjoyed reading to her, teaching her manners and words, how to tell time, how to write, read, dance, learn Morse Code, how to pick fruit in the woods on the warm days and grow vegetables on the colder ones. How they taught each other what a caring environment felt like. How she taught him to be a better man, and how she'd become the reason his heart had beat louder day after day for 353 days.

"She's an extraordinary kid," Joyce acknowledged.

He tilted his head sideways to her and gazed at her profile for a long moment. "She is," he agreed with a soft nod when she faced him again. "In more ways than one."

Joyce put her hand on his back and rubbed it benevolently. "Yes," she murmured.

He smiled considerably and then looked away awkwardly, a bit

uncomfortably even, as though he was afraid to show his true, sensible self, and he brought the cigarette to his lips.

“You love her, don’t you?” she whispered.

“Hmm?”

“I saw the way you two were together tonight. How much you care for each other.”

Tears threatened to course down his face and he didn’t want that, even though Eleven wasn’t here to see it. Damn it, he hated it. “Yeah,” he replied vaguely, swallowing the lump in his throat while dragging another long puff from his cigarette.

“Hey.” She removed her hand from his back and squeezed his fingers to get his attention, and they stared at each other again. “You should look into adopting her. I mean, not that it’s any of my business but, you know, in case you’re worried they might take her away from you.”

He chuckled nervously to swallow his discomfort. “Can’t hide her forever, right?”

“No, I guess you can’t, Hop,” she agreed with a smile. “But when I looked at you two, it’s pretty obvious that it’s the right way to go.”

He nodded knowingly, holding her quiet gaze, whispering a soft “Thanks”, and then he brought their joined hands to his mouth and kissed her knuckles.

She leaned into his arms and they held each other close for some time, seeking reassurance that at least their respective worlds were whole. She buried her face into his chest and his nose nuzzled into her hair, an uneasy but blissful silence building between them, keeping the world at bay. All he could see now were his memories of Eleven, Sara and Diane. His world wasn’t whole. He would probably never live without this fear that he had in his gut that Eleven would get hurt, someday, somehow, or worse, that he’d lose her. Like he’d lost Sara. With no warning. God, he could have used a drink now. He felt a soft tremor in his hands, and if there was one thing he didn’t

want right now, it was to go back down that emotional roller-coaster of a road again.

After an instant, he stood up abruptly. "Ugh, I need some air."

"What is it?" Joyce called out from behind.

He raised his hand to wave her off without looking back, struggling to keep his fears at bay, and staggered shakily in the direction of the road. "I'll be all right."

"Hop?" she called again, a tone of concern in her voice.

He *wasn't* all right. His legs were shaky. His head was spinning, his heart pounding so loud he could hear his blood flow in his temples. He sat down on the muddy ground, panting, and he crossed his ankles, wrapped his arms around his legs, his head dropping between his knees. Before he knew it Joyce was kneeling before him, her hands on his shoulders, asking him what was wrong, and he hid his face in his hands as his eyes started to water against his better determination.

"What?" Joyce asked worriedly, taking his hands in hers and making him look at her. "Hop, what is it? What did I say?"

"It's not you. I just ... I had this memory of Sara ..." He inhaled sharply and rubbed his face, and she put her hands on his knees. He shook his head. "With all that's been going on, maybe I'm just imagining it."

"What?" she said softly.

Looking deeply into her eyes, he hesitated a moment. "It's probably nothing."

"You can tell me," she softly intoned.

He sighed. "One day we were at the park. Diane, Sara, and me. And all of a sudden ... Sara ... She ... she panicked," he spluttered. "She just panicked. Snapped. It was like ... it was like she'd seen something terrifying, something deadly, horribly terrifying. She couldn't draw a breath. She was just ... looking wildly around her."

“Oh.” Joyce took his hands again, lingering her thumb on the blue hair elastic around his wrist, and then asked quietly, “You think something was there?”

“No, no, I mean, I don’t know,” he vacillated. “It was a beautiful day and there was nothing even remotely scary —”

“But now you’re wondering if there really wasn’t.” She’d finished the sentence for him with the words he hadn’t dared articulate.

“Yeah,” he breathed.

“But you lived in New York at that time, didn’t you?”

He shook his head. “It happened here in Hawkins. We were visiting my parents.”

“You think she may be alive, Sara?” she clarified.

He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know what to think ... I’m just ... just tired, I guess.”

Joyce considered him, and then she offered, “Eleven would know.”

“No,” he replied firmly.

“Okay,” she apologized. “Okay. We can find another way. I mean, if it’s what you want.”

“I don’t know what I —” His voice died away.

“All right,” she said resolutely as she got to her feet. Keeping his hands in hers, she pulled him up. “Up,” she commanded, and he did, swaying sideways a little. “You do need to sleep.”

He stared down intently into her gaze and nodded. “Right.”

“Can you walk, big guy? Or do I have to carry you?” She smiled up at him.

Hopper chuckled. “Nah, I’m good,” he said. He draped his arm

around her shoulders and they headed back to the house again. After a few feet, he looked down at her, amused and curious. "You could carry me?"

"You have *no idea* what a woman's determination can achieve."

"I'm starting to get the idea." When they were at the front door, he pointed his thumb toward the driveway and said, "Sorry about that."

"Don't be ridiculous, Hop." She smiled and he smiled back.

He bent down to her and kissed her cheek, then he hugged her. "Good night, Joyce."

"Good night, Hopper," she replied into his neck, gently stroking his back. "Don't let the bedbugs bite." She pulled back to look at him and tapped his chest with her index finger. "Or you call me. You call me first if that happens."

He smiled, nodding, kissed her cheek again, and then he walked away.

"I'm here if you need to talk, okay?" she called gently at his back and he tossed a wave at her without turning around.

3. Chapter 3

Will's bed being wide enough for two, Hopper had fallen asleep on the very edge of it in a clean tee he'd taken from his overnight bag. During the course of the night, Eleven had nested against him, waking him as she did, and he'd watched her peacefully sleeping for a few moments, resisting the urge to hug her against him. A rush of emotion had surged through him: she was his future, the family he thought he'd lost forever. She was real. It had taken him a while before he could drift into sleep again, but it had been totally worth it, and as he woke now at the sound of giggles from the room next door he realized it had been the first in a long time since he'd felt so blissful.

Hopper checked his watch; it was past nine. He propped himself onto his elbows and looked around: Eleven wasn't here anymore but he could hear her laughing with Joyce. A slow smile grew over his face.

"Ha-ha, I'm sorry, sweetheart, *that* is the sweetest, most disgusting pancake I've ever had," he heard Joyce say as he'd reached to open the door.

Joyce and Eleven were bent next to each other hovering over a plate on the table. Joyce had one arm around Eleven's shoulders and was covering her mouth with her other hand, either to hide her smile or to prevent herself from throwing up, Hopper couldn't tell which.

"Don't rely on men to teach you how to cook, kid," Hopper quipped from the bedroom door, and then he crossed to the kitchen.

Joyce and Eleven disengaged and turned around at the sound of his voice. "That's sexist, don't listen to him; men *can* cook," Joyce confided. "They just find it more convenient that we believe they can't."

When he was by their side, Hopper wrapped his arm around Eleven and kissed the top of her head with a hoarse "Morning", and then he did the same with Joyce who looked up at him, still smiling from her cooking experience but also apparently searching for remnant signs of struggle on his face.

“Let me try that,” he chirped, and leaned over the smoking plate. “It can’t be *that* bad.”

“Go on,” Joyce encouraged, “you’re in for a treat.”

Joyce pushed the plate toward him and he bit into a pancake with a straight face, glancing back and forth between Joyce and Eleven.

“They’re a bit ... dense ... and ... chewy,” he asserted as he struggled to hide his masticating the food with great effort — Could he simply swallow the lump whole instead of painfully chewing it? —, “it, uh, tastes a little like ... oatcake, no?” Joyce’s face was illuminated; he was probably not doing a great job at masking his inward battle not to choke on the “pancake”. “But it’s not that bad for a first try.” He smirked in triumph when he’d finally swallowed. “Hey, look at this one: it’s like the dark side of the moon.” All three laughed heartedly, and then he clapped his hands and offered cheerfully: “Eggos, anyone?”

Joyce scoffed. “What? No!” she protested with an indignant smile. “Are you kidding? *You* show us how you do your pancakes and we girls watch,” she decided as she pulled back a chair and sat down. Eleven looked down at Joyce and mimicked her.

“Ha! You know what, ladies? Mornings are for coffee and contemplation.”

Joyce raised her brows and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Okay,” he granted with his deep voice, holding up his hands in defeat. “Where are the boys? I could use some help.”

“They’re catching up in Jonathan’s room. You’re on your own with this.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Fine,” he stressed, never breaking their game of daring gazes. He mimicked rolling up non-existent sleeves and then opened his palm up. “Flour, baking powder, salt, sugar, milk, eggs, and butter. Please.”

“So far, so good,” Joyce remarked as she hurriedly busied herself at the cupboards and countertop. When she’d given him all the

ingredients he demanded, she poured him a cup of coffee.

He leaned closer to her and lowered his voice. "FYI, I do cook," he confessed, accepting her steaming mug.

She smiled. "I never doubted that, Hop."

Moments later, all five of them were gathered around the table. By the smile on Will's face, Hopper could tell that the boy was definitely back. He was eagerly talking with his brother and Eleven about music, sports, biking, and games Hopper had never heard of before. Hopper felt Joyce's gaze on him from across the table and turned his face to her. He stared back into her musing eyes; she looked serene, thankful. He was glad for her. This woman; she was something. He'd known her almost all his life, and yet she never ceased to surprise him. Especially not recently. He would have hated it if she'd had to go through the same horrors he'd been through. She was an amazing woman and an exceptional mother. She was genuinely happy and that gave Hopper inner satisfaction. She deserved to be happy. She looked away, put her elbow on the table, raised her palm to her mouth and leaned into it. She was beautiful. But when she was happy, she was outstandingly beautiful.

A little after ten, Hopper and Eleven decided to hit the road, and Joyce walked them out.

She hugged Eleven and looked up at Hopper. "If you need anything, *anything*, Hop, you call me. You call me first," she requested.

He nodded his head in agreement and smiled. "You too," he replied. "So I'll see you around?"

"Sure hope so."

Joyce's and his eyes locked together again as he reversed the car in the driveway, and then it roared off onto the road.

4. Chapter 4

They had cleaned the secluded house, Joyce had sent Jonathan over to help install new windows, and Hopper had filled the freezer with Eggos in case of non-substantial emergencies. He'd been back to work and things seemed to have settled back to boringly normal. Even the snow had begun falling heavily for several days. Two weeks ago, he'd talked to Dr. Owens about the adoption Joyce had wisely advised, and the doc had replied he'd look into it. If it was something they could do, Hopper would ask Eleven how she felt about it before moving forward with the project. But since nothing was certain yet he hadn't told her anything, not wanting to disappoint or distress her in case she got her hopes up and it turned out that was not possible. If that had however been the case, he knew he'd keep looking for another way, even if it had to be off the record or under the radar.

Things were good. With one exception. Hopper hadn't seen or heard from Joyce since the morning after the night he'd gone to retrieve the hideous body from her fridge, almost three weeks ago, and he was beginning to miss the time when he'd seen her every day.

He closed the door to his office, put his mug on his desk and subbed his half-smoked cigarette into the ashtray, and he picked up the phone and dialed Melvaid's General Store.

"Hey," he greeted when Joyce answered, "it's Hopper."

"Oh, hi, Hop," she replied warmly. "I was wondering about you. What have you been up to?"

"You know, uh, Eleanor Gillespie was attacked by an owl again. She's considering suing the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals for harassment now. Oh, and, uh, Van Tobin ended his drive in Cyndie Purdie's driveway, but I'm sure you've heard about that one. Turns out rear-wheel-drive cars aren't the best of choices for snowy weather. Back to the exciting old routine, as you can see."

He heard her laugh into the phone. "Well, I'm sure not gonna complain about that."

“Yeah,” he admitted, “me neither.”

“And how’s Eleven?”

“Actually she’s, uh ...” He paused and thought about it. “Actually, I think she’s a bit bored. I was thinking maybe I could call the Wheeler boy and his buddies and pick them up tonight, and Will too, if you’re okay with that. What do you think? You know, give ’em an evening break. It’s Friday night, after all. They could play ... I don’t know. What do kids play today?”

“They like ... role-playing games.”

“Fine,” Hopper enthused, then his tone changed to a more concerned one: “That’s an indoor game, right?”

“Yes but it usually goes on for *hours*.”

“That’s fine.”

“I’ll chaperone with you,” she offered.

“You would?”

“Sure, I mean, we’d probably have to set your house on fire, pretend it was a dragon attack in order to end their game at one point but, hey, why not?”

He chuckled. “Sounds like a plan. Okay, all right, I’ll make some phone calls and see you tonight then. Say, six o’clock?”

“Sounds good.”

It had been easy to set the night up. At first, Mike had objected that the game needed to be prepared long in advance and you couldn’t just decide to throw a party and improvise, but he had just as fast realized that Hopper had meant it was either tonight or God knew when, and had instantly changed his mind.

The kids had set their board game up on the table, and Hopper and

Joyce were having a glass of wine outside, sitting on the porch steps and enjoying themselves despite the cold. It was Hopper's first drink in nearly a year; Joyce had brought it.

"They're good kids," Hopper conceded.

"Yeah ... Do you remember what it felt like to be thirteen?"

"Hmm-hmm, more or less, yeah. I was more into a different genre of RPGs."

"Girls," she guessed, but it sounded more like a statement.

"Girls," he avowed. "Guilty as charged. I was a jerk."

"You weren't." She cocked her head to the side and rested it on the back of her hand. "It *was* a role-playing game, Hop; you were this, uh, this ..." She seemed to be looking for the right words.

He smiled. "Come on, say it," he encouraged.

"This self-assured —"

"Stupid moron?" he offered.

"— super cool and funny guy, a bit cranky and mysterious, —" she continued, ignoring his remark.

"Eleven would have called me a mouth breather," Hopper reflected on himself.

"— but I'd figured out your secret."

"Really? What was it?"

"You were tough on the outside and marshmallow-y tender on the inside."

Hopper laughed. "You'd figured that out, huh?" he queried with twinkling eyes.

"Yep," she said with a hint of pride.

He chuckled. "Enough about me already."

She opened her mouth agape and pointed a finger at him. "See? You haven't changed one bit, Mr. Secretive Guy," she giggled and lay her palm onto his chest. They stared intently at each other a moment, and when she became aware of her hand she removed it. "God, that seems like forever ago."

"Nah, we're not that old," he grimaced. "And hey, we still don't care about what most people think, we're still a parade of pure rebellion — and it no longer has anything to do with senior year being about breaking all the possible rules."

"Oh," she beamed, putting her hand on his arm on impulse, "remember when we filled the swimming pool with Jell-O?"

"Ha-ha! Yes! It had to be drained but not before I could push Marlon Leighton into it."

"Oh my god, that's right!"

"I was such an asshole. That's one other thing that hasn't changed," he joked.

"Quit playing coy, Hopper; you're not an asshole."

"I am, but that's okay. And what about the cups full of water prank?"

"2,713 cups," they breathed, amazed, in unison.

"Yeah ..." Hopper nodded his head in assent and approval of this little trip down Memory Lane. "So anyway, you see: it was like yesterday. And I'm sure we can probably still run pretty fast, too." He smiled fondly at her as she put her glass down to pull her pack of Camels out of her pocket. He took one of his own, and then he caught sight of her shivering when he brought his lighter to the tip of her cigarette. "Are you cold?"

"Just a bit. Let's walk a little."

"Okay, sure." He put down his glass, too, lit his cigarette, and

followed her down the steps. The sound of snow crunching under their feet accompanied them through the woods. "How's Will been doing?"

"Pretty good. He's back to being him."

"That's good. I guess?" When Will had disappeared last year Joyce had told Hopper he wasn't like the other kids, so Hopper had assumed the kid was more of a model student than he'd been.

"Yes, that's good."

"And how are *you*?" he asked, bending closer to her.

"Relieved," she blew out. She looked up at him with a smile and searched his eyes. He didn't know exactly what she was hoping to find there, but he knew there was a bond between them, a connection they could both rely on. "So relieved. Sometimes I can almost convince myself this whole thing never actually happened and it was just the worst nightmare I'd ever had, all in my head."

"I know," he said. "How's your sleep?"

"You're a doctor now?" she joked.

"No, I've just ..." He shrugged. "You know, I've been worried about you is all."

She stopped and faced him. "I know. I've been worried about you, too."

"Meh! I'm the Chief, I'm strong and tough and cranky and grumpy; I'm untouchable." He smirked and threw the butt of his cigarette away, flipping it out of his fingers.

"Right, the hard candy shell with the spongy, gooey core."

"I'm not."

"Suit yourself, Chief Stone-Cold-Heart Hopper. I know who you are."

“Okay, you can think of me as a s’more then, if you like.”

“A s’more is good,” she confirmed. “I mean it’s a good comparison.” She started walking again and he stared at the back of her for few seconds. He could swear she was hitting on him, but then again, no, he wasn’t sure. “God, a campfire and s’mores would be perfect now. It’s so cold,” she said.

He shook the snow out of the top of his boots and trotted after her to catch up. “We can always go inside. I’m not gonna let a bunch of kids rule my house, right?” He rubbed her back over her coat in an up-and-down motion.

“No, I’m fine. Let’s give them some intimacy.”

“Intimacy? Uh-oh, I hope you’re not suggesting something other than PG.”

Startled, she stopped suddenly. “Hopper!” She laughed. “They’re only 13!”

“So? When I was 13,” he started, looking into his memories, keeping the friction of his hand on her back, and then he looked down at her again. “Ha! Never mind ...”

She spun toward him and faced him again, and he moved his massage to her arms. But when she softly said with somewhat endearing eyes, “Fatherhood suits you, Hop. I wish I’d known your little Sara,” his hands stopped short on her shoulders.

It had come out of nowhere. But he genuinely didn’t know what to say to that. It wasn’t the first time she’d called out to his most inner self, little by little reducing his, quote, “cold, stone heart” to tiny grains of warm sand, but this time she’d aimed straight to his soul. As if her soothing fingers had lingered on his very wound. His emotions tumbled around and through each other; the loss, the guilt, the anger, the love. She’d touched him so much he barely registered what he was doing when he bent down in the impulse of the moment and tentatively pressed his lips on hers. He slid his hands from her shoulders to her neck, wanting to cup her face and hold her closer to him, but she shivered in his arms and he immediately pulled back.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, “I shouldn’t have.”

“It’s all good, Hop,” she replied reassuringly, and she took his hands. “Except for your hands; your hands are freezing.”

“Ha!” he chuckled.

He pulled her into his embrace, she wrapped her arms around him, and he rubbed her back again in an attempt to keep them both warm. She tilted her face toward him, resting her chin on his chest, a faint smile on her face that he mirrored.

Anchoring his gaze with hers, he stroked his hands all the way up to the back of her head, and said, “They should be warm now.”

They both squeezed their eyes shut as their lips connected again, and she instantly parted hers to deepen the kiss and he followed her lead. She clung her arms tighter around him, gripping his shoulders from behind to pull herself up, and he repositioned his own arms around her waist to gather her closer. Her lips were cold but soft, and her mouth tasted of the sweet wine she’d drunk earlier. The way she was kissing him made him believe she was saying “I missed you,” and he’d become smitten with her and miss her, too, ever since she’d entered his life again that dreadful morning of November 6, 1983. But he didn’t want to push his luck although he hoped that she understood him, too. At the thought he engulfed her whole petite body in his embrace and tilted her head to the side to deepen the kiss again, something between forceful and teasing. They were panting, small moans escaping their mouths now and then. The way she bit his lip, the way they pressed their bodies against each other as if they could never be close enough, the way she ran her fingers through his hair ... his head was going all fuzzy, and an immensely blissful, tingly feeling flooded his body. Reaching for air, he broke the kiss and bent down more to kiss her smooth jawline and neck and she tilted her face up to grant him better access. She was panting, too.

His heart racing, he sandwiched her face between his hands and longingly sunk his gaze into her rich brown eyes.

“How far away do your teen years feel now?” he wondered with a smile, still gasping a little.

“Oh my god,” she exhaled in laughter, dropping her forehead onto his chest.

Hopper brought her closer, pressing his lips onto her forehead and then on top of her head, and he held her tight against his heart afterward, giving them time to catch their breath. He would certainly have started kissing her again if they hadn’t been interrupted by sudden bursts of laughter and screams.

He took her hand and they both turned toward the shack.

“Hey!” Hopper shouted, letting go of Joyce’s hand and hurrying back. “Hey! What’s all the fuss about?”

“Eleven has to throw snowballs at Mike!” Dustin shouted back, laughing.

“Say again?” he called as he approached in long strides, his feet kicking the snow.

Dustin shrugged his shoulders and raised his palms slightly. “It’s her dare,” he said as if it were obvious.

Hopper stopped about ten feet away from Dustin, Lucas, and Will, his eyes opened wide in disbelief. “You’ve been playing Truth or Dare??” He looked quickly back at Joyce — “You knew about this?” —, she shook her head no, smiling, and Hopper returned his attention to Dustin and the other kids. “You’re kidding, right? That’s not what we agreed on.”

“You didn’t disagree to it either,” Dustin demurred.

“That’s simply because you never mentioned it!” he exclaimed, his incredulity growing by the second.

Suddenly, Hopper felt a snowball hit him right in the middle of his lower back. He quickly turned around, and opened his mouth in surprise. “You too?” he exclaimed at Joyce. Out of all those kids. Unbelievable. Into what realm had he suddenly fallen where he’d become the only responsible adult?

“Come on, Hop, give them a break. Be the cool uncle, not the

nasty physics teacher,” she suggested, and he couldn’t believe his ears.

“First of all,” he said, raising his index finger, “I’ve always hated, and I mean, *hated* scienc—“

Another unexpected snowball hit him. In the back of his head this time. He turned around to see Eleven raising both hands, saying “Sorry, wasn’t meant for you,” just as Mike ran past him, and when Hopper turned to Joyce again, hoping to finally find some sort of support there, she was laughing out loud.

“Okay. Fine.” Hopper grinned. He doubled over, gathering snow in his bare hands while keeping Joyce in his sights. “I hope you still run fast, Joyce,” he cackled.

She knitted her brows and her amused face turned into a don’t-you-dare one. “Hopper, what are you doing?”

“You know damn well what I’m doing. It’s down to me and you, Joyce.” He packed the snow into a tight ball, and then urged, “Run!”

He started chasing after her, roaring threateningly like he’d done back in the day. She *did* still run fast, he realized. “Will, help!” she shouted, furtively looking over her shoulder. Snowballs were flying now as all the kids had joined the fun, and one or two times Hopper had to bend over to avoid being hit.

The one Hopper didn’t see coming was the one that Eleven threw at his stomach from being a tree. He veered off to her, changing his target, mischievously shouting “Come here, kid!” as she ran away from him. He might not have been in good enough shape to catch Joyce, but it took him only a few seconds to grab Eleven. Startled she screamed with laughter. “You little traitor,” he groaned as he threw her over his shoulder like a potato sack. She kicked her legs in the air helplessly, shouting “Let me go! Let me go!” so he twisted her around, holding her properly, and ran her around in circles, both of them laughing.

Then he put her back down on her feet, squeezed her against him with a kiss in her hair, and said, “I’m not after you, kid. Don’t get in

my way.”

She smiled up at him. “I can find her for you.”

“Oh, I’ll find her, kid. Don’t worry about that, I’ll find her.” He smiled, tousled her hair and ran off.

He scrutinized the woods, straining to hear into the forest lit only by the porch lights, and then he saw her arm. Joyce was hiding behind a tree. He checked back at the kids, counting them silently — all present — and he prowled toward Joyce. Just as he was within an arm’s reach, a branch creaked under his foot, and she fled. He hastily plunged forward but missed her by mere inches and ended up head first in the fresh snow.

“Jeez,” he shook the snow out of his hair and wiped his face with the inside of his collar. “Okay, Joyce,” he called out as he rolled over onto his back, “you win!”

Seconds later she stood above him. From this point of view, she was immensely tall, he could almost swear she’d reach the tip of the trees if she raised her arms. But more importantly, she was aiming a snowball at him. In a fake protective instinct, he narrowed his eyes and placed his hands in front of them. “You sure?” she wanted to know with a teasing smile.

“Yeah, yeah, you win. Help me up,” he said as he reached out his hands to her.

She looked at him dubiously, raising an eyebrow, but she dropped her snowball and offered her hands anyway. Hopper gave them a quick shake and he caught her as she fell awkwardly, half in the snow half onto him.

“I knew it!” she exclaimed, smacking her palm onto his chest.

“Yeah, sorry, I couldn’t resist myself, but I’m a trustworthy guy, I swear,” he said as his hands lingered on her shoulders.

“I know that,” she confessed.

“Don’t trust me,” he said, meaning to confuse her.

“Shut up, Hop.”

She leaned down and kissed him, and he propped his head up, opening just one eye to make sure they didn't have an audience. After a moment, they both stood, their clothes becoming damp and cold in spite of the heat that radiated from within their bodies.

“How are things between you and Eleven?” Joyce wondered as they ambled back, arm in arm.

“They're ... better than ever.”

“I'm glad. Are you happy?”

“I *am* happy, Joyce.” He grinned at her.

“You deserve it.”

“And I'll be even *happier* when I get the answer to my request to Owens.”

“You did it? You asked to be her legal guardian?” It sounded like she couldn't believe it, and he confirmed it with a smiling nod. “That's so great!” She pulled at his arm gently so she could reach his face and kissed his cheek. “So great,” she repeated.

From the corner of his eyes, Hopper noted her discreetly wiping a tear from her face and he stopped them both. He cupped her neck, thumbing her jaw. “Hey now, you're not going to cry, are you? Cause it's not done yet. Save it for later. Besides, I didn't tell her.”

“No, I'm not ... crying. It's the wind.”

“Right.” He didn't believe her one bit but he let her get away with it. He kissed her again, and said, “Come on, let's wrap ourselves under the blankets. Ooh ... remember when —?”

“Yes,” she interrupted him. “I remember. And no. You're the one who wanted this evening to remain PG.”

“I was never the wise one,” he murmured in her ear as they walked inside. She chuckled.

5. Chapter 5

“Hands off,” Hopper warned when upon exiting the bathroom where he’d changed into dry clothes, he caught sight of the Wheeler kid’s hand on Eleven’s leg.

Mike complied and an awkward silence settled. All five kids had borrowed dry clothes from Eleven and were sitting around the small kitchen table, some drumming their fingers on it, others balancing on their chairs or leaning on their arms folded upon the table, as Dustin looked at a big book that resembled a grimoire. Joyce was on the couch.

“Okay, let’s talk Demo-dogs,” Dustin offered, closing his book with a snap.

“Seriously, guys? You still wanna talk about that?” Hopper said.

“What?” Dustin asked innocently. “We can talk about the Mind Flayer if you prefer.”

“The case is closed,” Hopper assured them coldly, and the mood shifted in an instant.

“Is it, really? From what I understand,” Dustin rattled on, opening the book again, “whatever malevolent shadowy creature possessed Will, it’s still out there. And now, according to the Dungeon and Dragons Monster Manual, Mind Flayers are, quote, ‘psionic tyrants from another dimension that harvest entire races for their own twisted ends, and they live in an evil underground cave network called The Underdark.’ Sound familiar?”

“Enough,” Hopper said firmly, and he took the book from Dustin and put it away on the kitchen countertop. Suddenly, he felt a pain in his chest but before he could comprehend it, it was gone.

“Using mind control and psionic powers,” Lucas said, “mind flayers operate as a hive mind, reporting into an elder brain who gives them commands. They also have gross facial tentacles to slurp your brain like milkshakes.”

“I SAID ENOUGH,” Hopper shouted with a definitive slam of his hand on the table. He looked around at all of them. “I mean, am I the only one who’s being sensible here? What’s the point in all this?” No one dared answer, not even Joyce. “Joyce?”

“I don’t know, Hop,” she reasoned. “I hear you, I do, and I would rather never talk about it ever again, but they do have a point: this thing is still out there.”

“While Will was a useful vessel in nearly turning Hawkins into the Upside Down’s personal vacation home, he wasn’t perfect because doesn’t have the magical powers needed to transform the Shadow Monster from Mind Flayer to Mind Flayer Lich,” Mike opined.

Dustin stepped in again: “In D&D there are even more powerful mind flayers out there, they’re known as Mind Flayer Arcanists or Mind Flayer Liches and they use powerful sorcery to augment their already fearsome psionic powers.”

Hopper scanned the faces around the table, all eager and anxious in their own ways to get this story filed under Exhibit H for history. “It’s just a book!”

“Is it?” Will asked.

“You know who does have these powers the Mind Flayer Lich needs?” Mike continued. Of course Hopper was well aware of whom Mike was talking about, but the Wheeler kid said it anyway: “El.”

The sharp, acute pain in Hopper’s chest was back, stronger than before, and he had to grab his chest and lurch forward to suppress it. What the hell was that? The kids had shut up and he didn’t want to alarm any of them, so he straightened again, trying to push away his discomfort and grimacing as twinge told him he had moved too quickly. Her hand on his arm, Joyce threw him an inquiring gaze, but he shook his head to tell her it was nothing.

“What if the Mind Flayer tries to hijack her powers for its own evil plans? It didn’t know about her and her powers until when she breached the gate. But now, it knows she’s out there,” Lucas said.

“And with a powerful psionic like El under its control it’s gonna take a whole lot more than a few heat lamps to prevent Lich-leven from destroying Hawkins and the rest of our world as we know it.”

Hopper stared helplessly at Eleven and sat down next to Joyce, rubbing his hair nervously.

“All that we’re saying,” Mike explained, “is that we need to be prepared. Learn our mythology, their weakness, stuff like that.”

“That’s why it takes us hours and days getting ready to a game,” Will said.

Joyce rubbed her palm on Hopper’s shoulders. “We’ve all seen what it did to Will,” she admitted. “We’ve all seen these creepy caverns right beneath us. I mean, even you almost died down there.”

“I know, I know,” he breathed, looking up at Eleven again.

Hopper didn’t want to hear any of this. Didn’t want to go through this again, didn’t know if he only could. How could he ever protect her if any of what they were saying was true? In ground-zero Hawkins? Why not feed her to the sharks? All that he wanted was for her to lead a normal life.

Eleven was silent. Staring back into his eyes as if she knew. Well, obviously, she knew. No blindfold or psionic abilities were particularly needed to read his expression of uneasiness. He was sure he was easier to read than a first-grader book. He tried to smile to her, and tried to believe none of this was true. To speak of her as threatened again, raised feelings like anger and murder in him, and he was sick of being angry.

“Maybe they’re right,” Joyce murmured against his shoulder, “there’s no harm in looking into it. We’re all on the same side here.”

“I know they’re right.” He broke eye contact with Eleven, wanting to foster the faint spark of hope in Eleven’s eyes rather than her disquiet, and turned his face to Joyce, gritting his teeth. She took the hand from his back and gently grabbed his hand. He squeezed it and then let it go to get up. “Okay, kid, I’ll take a look at your book.”

“And we’re gonna go,” Joyce announced, getting to her feet as well. “It’s getting late.”

“Hey, um, Hopper,” Mike said quietly, turning away from the others. “Next week’s Snow Ball, and I promised El I’d take her. Well, that was actually last year, but I was wondering if maybe you’d let her go.”

“Snowball?” Hopper whispered quizzically at Joyce. “Didn’t we just do that?”

“It’s okay, Hop,” she smiled.

He looked back at Mike. “I’ll think about it.”

“Thanks.”

“But listen to me, kid,” he warned. “You hurt her, I’m not the Chief anymore. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

Minutes later, Dustin, Lucas, and Will were the first out of the house. Hopper looked away when Mike took Eleven’s hand and he found Joyce smiling knowingly at him.

“Boys will be boys,” she whispered.

He leaned forward as if to confide the most secretive secret: “She’s a girl.”

“A *gorgeous* girl.”

Hopper drew a rueful grin and suddenly felt as if someone was tightening barbed wire around his chest. He was aware he probably smoked too much, but he’d never felt a pain this intense — not coming out of nowhere, anyway. The next thing he knew, he was lying on the floor, all five kids and Joyce calling out his name and coming into focus as they stared down at him with concerned looks.

“Oh my god, Hop!”

“What happened?” he wondered, stroking the back of his head, looking for a bump under his fingers.

“We were talking and all of a sudden, you collapsed,” Joyce replied.

“I did?” he asked, pushing himself up to a sitting position.

“You okay?” Eleven asked.

“Yeah, kid, I’m good. My head is tough as wood.”

“Has that happened before?” Joyce asked worryingly.

“No. Must be the cold, the emotion, the wine, I don’t know. It’s been a while since I’ve had a drink.”

“I need to take you to the hospital.”

“No, you don’t,” he said with conviction as he stood up.

Joyce mirrored him and grabbed his elbow in anticipation. “I’ll drive the boys home and then I’ll take you to the hospital.”

“Joyce, no. Seriously, there’s no need,” he insisted. He caught Eleven’s distraught gaze. He sighed, and said to her, too: “I’m fine. *Promise*. I guess I just got lightheaded.” He pulled Eleven to him. “Go, anything happens —”, he said calmly to Joyce.

“— you call me,” she stressed, and he acquiesced.

But an hour after they’d left, he was smoking outside the shack when he heard a car. He grabbed the wooden railway, flicked his cigarette away, and went inside for his gun. Once he was back on the steps, he heard her.

“It’s me, Hop.”

“Joyce, you really didn’t need to come back.”

When she was at the foot of the steps, she looked up at him.

“Jonathan was home, and he was okay with looking after his brother.”

“I’m not going to the hospital. I’m *fine*,” he repeated firmly.

“All right, all right. Can I stay anyway? I’m here already.”

“Of course,” he said.

He led her inside, opened the door, and gestured for her to come in.

“It’s not five-star — not sure I’d even rate it with one — and the partition wall is as thin as paper ...”

“It’s perfectly fine, Hop.”

Joyce walked past him, lingering her hand over his chest and went to sit on the bunk in the main living space. Hopper tenderly considered her from the door. He pulled his sweater over his head and crossed to her. There, he grabbed her face and kissed her, pushing her down slowly.

“Oh, and yeah, the bed squeaks, too,” he recalled in a whisper when the box-spring squeaked under their weight. He propped himself over her and they smiled at each other before he rolled to her side, slid his arm beneath her neck, and drew her to his shoulder. “Not that it would matter much if it didn’t with a kid who can open the door and be right with us anytime. I guess we’ll have to rest here like good kids.”

“I just came to check on you, Hop.”

“What?” he exclaimed faking outrage. “You don’t trust me?”

She closed her eyes and sighed.

“What is it?”

“Okay, maybe that’s not entirely true.”

“What are you talking about?” He pulled his head back to see the hesitant expression on her face. “Joyce?”

“Something troubled me on my way back home. Something that we’d said while we were talking with the kids and I couldn’t put my finger on what it was. But then I remembered.”

“So, what’s troubling you?”

“You,” she replied softly.

He expected many possible answers, but “you” certainly wasn’t one of them. “Me?”

“Yeah, more precisely the part where I found you tied to this vine thing in the tunnels.”

“Oh, okay. What about it?”

“I recalled how last month, at first you pushed me not to worry about Will’s condition, stressing that I needed to accept his worsening condition as PTSD rather than signs of something more dangerous.”

“I know, I’m sorry about that.”

“No, what I mean to say is that I don’t want you to be oblivious and accept things as is.”

“Okay, you’re right.”

“What happened to you earlier could have something to do with the time you spent in those tunnels.”

“But after you’ve rescued me, I was checked out. I was fine. I don’t think it has anything to do with what happened to me tonight.”

“But how can you know for sure?”

“I can’t,” he admitted.

“And you’re ready to accept that?” He returned her gaze but was unable to answer. “I mean, do you remember when we found Will last year?”

“Of course I do,” he nodded, brushing his hand on her arm.

“He had this ... huge ... gross worm in his throat.” She shuddered briefly at the thought. “Are you sure nothing got into you?”

“No, nothing.”

“It could have been little. I mean, back then they said that even the air in the compound was toxic.”

He squeezed her shoulder and held her tight as he kissed her hair, and then he leaned his cheek against her head. “I’m fine, Joyce. It was a one-time incident. It’s probably nothing.”

“There’s that oblivious attitude again,” she warned.

He chuckled. “Sorry.”

“You’d tell me if there was something?”

“Yes,” he said, and he meant it.

He’d made a pact with himself, the same he’d made with Eleven: no more lies.

Hopper remembered that night. He’d seen himself dying alone there. And if it hadn’t been for Joyce and Bob, he probably would have. He’d been suffocating. *Suffocating*, he thought, a sensation of something being off. There had been something before, too, he recalled. Not so much suffocating as the vines that had pinned him to the ground, but yet again just as nasty. Two of them, he remembered. And they’d spat onto his face, or sneezed, or whatever the hell it was that had happened. He’d grunted and coughed hard. His vision had quickly blurred. That must have been when he’d passed out.

He heard Joyce call softly. “Hop?”

“Yeah,” he replied harshly, fluttering his eyes open wide at the ceiling as though he’d been brutally taken out of a nightmare.

“What’s wrong?”

“There was something,” he whispered reluctantly.

“What? What do you mean?”

“*Maybe* there’s something.” He looked at her; she was on full alert. “In the tunnels, when you found me. I mean, uh, it was before you found me.” Joyce settled into a crossed-legged position, facing him, and he folded his arm over his forehead. “There were some sort of ... well, it looked like ... I don’t know what it was, like heads of Demo-dogs, but only their heads, clinging to the sides of the tunnels. And I got sprayed in the face with it ... what was it? Pollen, perhaps?” Joyce looked shocked. “I got sprayed twice,” he admitted.

“Oh ...”

“It felt like ... dust, maybe?”

“It got into your mouth?” she asked, alarmed.

“Yeah, but I mean, really, it could be nothing. Maybe those things down there were just meant to be chloroform dispensers or something. You know, to make their prey pass out rapidly and then it’s easier for the vines to ...”

“Did you feel feverish?”

“Um, no.”

“Nauseous?”

“Hmm ... Not at the time, I don’t think so,” he said, trying to revive his memories of that day, “but I did throw up until the next morning or so.”

“You could be incubating something nasty, Hop. You need to get checked out again,” she stressed.

“Yeah, I know,” he sighed. “I’ll call Dr. Owens.”

“Okay.” She studied him. “Can I trust you on that?”

“Yes, Joyce, I will call him. I was supposed to call him in the next few days anyway.”

“All right.”

“Come down now, all’s gonna be good,” he said reassuringly.

“Okay,” she blew out.

Hopped folded his free arm underneath his head, and scrutinized Joyce’s face calmly as she stretched her neck to one side and the other. He narrowed his eyes, his forehead wrinkling and his lips pursing, the corners of his mouth slightly curled up.

“This little scrunchy face hasn’t changed ever since I’ve known you,” she said, smiling now.

“Oh yeah?” he asked, slightly pleased with himself.

“Typical of when you’ve done or about to do or say something silly.”

He laughed. “Really? This one?” He did it again.

She could help but laugh. “What is it?”

“Well you said ‘Can I trust you on that?’ and I was simply wondering what is it with girls these days that they need a promise to be assured things will get done?”

Joyce nestled comfortably against him, her hand on his chest and her leg draping over his. “And what is it with men that they can’t keep their word?”

“I’ll ask them when I see one.”

She smiled back at him. Hopper withdrew his arm from beneath his head to capture her hand in his over his chest, squeezed her shoulder and kissed her again.

6. Chapter 6

Hopper and Eleven exited the Blazer and walked hand in hand toward the entrance of the gym where music was already playing. He stopped and looked at the building a moment, thoughtful, and turned around to her.

“Late,” Eleven commented.

“I know,” Hopper sighed, and he put his hands over her shoulders. “Next thing we’ll be working on is promptness.” She nodded silently, and he removed his hands from her shoulders, gauging her. “Nervous?” She shrugged. “Don’t be. All your friends will be there. They’re probably already inside, anxious to see you.”

“How do I look?”

He chuckled. “You look ...” he hesitated.

“Pretty?”

“You look beautiful,” he said in an earnest voice. Unfortunately, very beautiful, he added inwardly. From the look on her face, that was all she wanted to hear.

“Okay,” he breathed, “pick you up in two hours?”

“Yes,” she smiled, and gave him a little peck on the cheek.

He watched her go, her back straight and her chin up, and then he called her out, “Oh, hey, kid, wait up.”

Eleven turned around and he quickly was in front of her again.

“Here,” he said as he removed the blue elastic hairband from around his wrist and rolled it around Eleven’s. “That was Sara’s,” he explained, staring at it. Then he looked up at her. “It’s yours now.” As her eyes began glowing, he shrugged his shoulders slightly and said, “Something was missing in this ...” he gestured around her face and dress, “new bitchin’ look.”

“Thank you.”

She took a step forward and wrapped her arms around his waist, and he leaned his cheek on the top of her head, careful not to mess her hair up. “You have fun, okay, kid?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be around, waiting for you.”

“Okay,” she said, kissing his cheek and disengaging.

He stared at her back as she walked like a princess toward the entrance, feeling a sweet little twinge in his heart, and then he started backward.

“Every breath you take, every move you make, every bond you break, every step you take, I’ll be watching you. Every single day, every word you say ...” the song played in the distance. It was the first time Eleven was out “by herself” under Hopper’s watch and he couldn’t shake the idea that this song was totally inappropriate. As if the Mind Flayer was still looming over Hawkins, zeroing in precisely on Eleven and closely watching every breathe, step, claim, and smile she made. He shook the idea out of his head. Who was being paranoid now?

“Hey,” Hopper said as he walked, hands in his pockets, toward Joyce.

“Hey,” she replied.

“Thought I might find you out here.”

“Will wanted me to give him some space ... so I’m giving him a few feet.”

Hopper chuckled, and then took a cigarette out of his pack. He braced his back against the car next to her, lit the cigarette, and offered it to her. “What do you say? I’m pretty sure that Mr. Cooper retired in the ’70s, so we might be okay.” She took it, inhaled the smoke sharply, coughed and laughed, looking quizzically at him. “How are you holding up?” His tone had turned serious.

She shrugged her shoulders. "You know."

"Yeah."

"That feeling never goes away. It is true what they say, you know. Every day it does get a little easier."

They stared knowingly at each other and then he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and she lay her hand on his as he pulled her against him. They remained in a comfortable silence for a moment or two.

"Remember when it was us out there?" she asked eventually, bobbing her head in the direction of the building that had little changed in a generation.

"Yeah."

"Do you think things would have been different?"

"Different how?" he wondered.

"Well, you know ... If I hadn't hung out with, uh, Lonnie."

Hopper looked down at her, considering it briefly, and then he shrugged his shoulders dismissively. That was in the past. There had been good and bad times. Like with Eleven, there was a lot of things he should have done differently even back then, but what was important now was to focus on not repeating the same mistakes again. And tonight, his heart told him that it was possible, that maybe he wasn't cursed.

"Heard the news," Joyce whispered, looking up at him.

"What's that?" he asked, looking down at her.

She arched a brow.

"Oh, *that*, right! Thanks. My mind was somewhere else."

She gently patted his chest. "Well, your heart certainly is in the right place, Hop."

“Is that right?” he smiled. She nodded. “How do you know anyway?”

“What do you think?”

He shook his head, smiling, looking at the building ahead of them. “This kid, seriously.”

“Any other incident?”

“No, ma’am!” he replied, looking back at her.

“What did Owens say?”

“He’s scheduled me to have an MRI, CT scan, blood and urine tests next week; the whole nine yards.”

“How are you feeling about it?”

Hopper looked at her intently and sighed. Obviously he didn’t feel great and he was preparing to grapple with his grief, but she didn’t need to know everything. Yet. Maybe that would work as a sense of closure anyway. Who could know? That was still better than numbing himself and blacking out because of drug and alcohol abuse like he’d done repeatedly before Eleven.

“I’ll survive.” He smiled. “Hey, listen, we’ve got a couple of hours to kill, what do you say we get a little closer, get a better shot at the music, have a little dance maybe, a couple of cigarettes under the steps ... Whaddaya say?”

“If we get caught, Hop, it’s on *our* kids,” he replied with a smile.

Hopper frowned, looking offended. “We won’t get caught.” He spun so that he could face her, and then he cupped her face, gently pressing himself against her, and kissed her. “Or we can just stay here and act like responsible adults.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you for reading my first Stranger Things fic.
It means the world for a “storyteller” to read a

review that expresses what a reader liked about their stories, even though it's "only" fanfiction. So help yourself and save a storyteller :)